

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Office of Human Development Services  
Administration for Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau  
National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect

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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

## **Study of National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect: 1988**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Study of National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect, also called the second National Incidence Study (NIS-2), was conducted in response to a specific Congressional mandate given in the Child Abuse Amendments of 1984 (P.L. 98-457). The purpose of the NIS-2 was to assess the current national incidence of child abuse and neglect, and to determine how the severity, frequency, and character of child maltreatment changed since the NIS-1.

The NIS-2 represents a follow-up to the NIS-1, completed in 1980, and it followed essentially the same design as that earlier study. Data were collected concerning cases of child maltreatment which were recognized and reported to the study by "community professionals" in a national probability sample of 29 counties throughout the U.S. The "community professionals" who participated in the study included the local Child Protective Services (CPS) staff as well as key respondents in a variety of other non-CPS agencies (such as schools, hospitals, police departments, juvenile probation authorities, etc.). CPS provided information about all reported cases accepted for investigation during the study. Participating professionals at other agencies served as "sentinels" by remaining on the lookout during the study data period for cases meeting the study's definitions of child maltreatment.

All cases reported to the study were assessed for their conformity to a set of standardized definitional criteria, and only those cases which fit the standards were considered "countable" and used as the basis of national estimates. The NIS-2 used two sets of definitional standards of abuse and neglect. One set corresponded identically to the definitions used in the NIS-1 and essentially reflected the numbers of children who experienced demonstrable harm as a result of maltreatment. Assessing the national incidence of cases countable under these standards provided a "core" or minimum estimate of the overall incidence of child maltreatment. The second set of definitional standards used in the NIS-2 was broader, or more inclusive. It provided a supplementary estimate which reflected the incidence of children who were endangered by maltreatment (i.e., placed at risk for harm, but not necessarily harmed yet). The core estimates were able to be compared with the NIS-1 findings to determine whether there were any statistically significant changes in incidence since 1980. The supplementary estimates

indicated the potential magnitude of the problem of abuse and neglect as perceived by community professionals.

The major objectives of the NIS-2 were to

- estimate the national incidence/prevalence of child abuse and neglect;
- determine the distribution and severity of child abuse and neglect;
- assess changes since the NIS-1 in the frequency, severity, and character of maltreatment;
- identify the relationship between the incidence of child abuse and neglect and child, family, and county characteristics; and
- determine the proportion of recognized child maltreatment known to CPS through official reports and the reporting rates for recognized cases by different types of agencies.

Key findings related to each of these objectives are as follows:

**Current national incidence of countable child abuse and neglect--**

- In 1986, an estimated 16.3 children per 1,000 or a total of more than one million children nationwide experienced abuse or neglect in 1986 which met the original standardized study definitions of maltreatment.
- Under the revised definitions, an estimated 25.2 children per 1,000 or a total of more than one and one-half million children nationwide experienced abuse or neglect in 1986.

**Distribution of child maltreatment by type--**

- The majority of cases countable under the original definitions (56%) involved abuse, and just under half (48%) involved neglect. Abused children represented an incidence rate of 9.2 per 1,000 and numbered about 580,400; there were 7.9 neglected children per 1,000 in 1986, representing about 498,000 children nationwide. Estimated incidence of the subcategories of abuse and of neglect were also determined:
  - The most frequent category of abuse was physical, followed by emotional abuse and then by sexual abuse, with incidence rates of 4.9, 2.8, and 2.2 children per 1,000, respectively.
  - The frequency ranking of the subcategories of neglect was educational, physical, and emotional, with incidence rates of 4.6, 2.9, and 0.8 children per 1,000, respectively.

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- The majority of cases countable under the revised definitions (63%) involved neglect, and fewer than half (43%) involved abuse, reversing the pattern found under the original definitions. There were 15.9 countable neglected children per 1,000, numbering 1,003,600 children nationwide, there were 10.7 abused children per 1,000, representing 675,000 children nationwide. Estimates for the subcategories of abuse and of neglect under the revised definitions were--
- The most frequent type of abuse was physical, followed by emotional abuse and then by sexual abuse, with incidence rates of 5.7, 3.4, and 2.5 children per 1,000, respectively;
- The frequency ranking of the subcategories of neglect differed from the pattern obtained under the original definitions. Using the revised definitions, physical neglect was by far the most frequent form of neglect, followed by educational neglect, and then emotional neglect, with incidence rates of 9.1, 4.6, and 3.5 children per 1,000 respectively.

#### **Severity of Injuries/Impairments from countable maltreatment--**

- Among cases countable under the original definitions, moderate injuries predominated, occurring in 72% of the countable cases; these were followed in frequency by serious injuries (15%), probable injuries (12%), and fatalities (0.1%).
- Among cases countable by revised standards, moderate injuries also predominated, occurring in 60% of the countable cases; these were followed in frequency by children believed to be endangered by the maltreatment they experienced (19%), then by probable injuries (11%), serious injuries (10%), and fatalities (0.1%).

#### **Changes since 1980 in incidence (under original definitions)--**

- Countable cases of maltreatment increased significantly (by 66%) over their 1980 incidence rate.
- The increase in countable cases primarily reflected a significant increase (of 74%) in the incidence of abuse.
- Among the abuse cases, there were significant rises in the incidence of physical and sexual abuse, with physical abuse increasing by 58% and sexual abuse occurring at more than triple its 1980 rate in 1986.
- Neither emotional abuse nor any form of neglect showed reliable changes in incidence rate since the earlier study.
- The only significant change in level of maltreatment-related injuries occurred in the category of moderate injury, which showed an 89% increase in its rate of incidence since the 1980 study. This suggested that the overall increase in countable cases of maltreatment may have largely been due to an increased

likelihood that professionals will recognize maltreatment, rather than to any increase in incidence per se.

## **Child, family, and county characteristics\* related to incidence, type, or severity of maltreatment--**

### **Child's Sex:**

Under both original and revised definitions, females experienced more abuse overall than did males and this reflected primarily their greater susceptibility to being sexually abused. They were also more likely to experience "probable" injury/impairment in comparison to males. Sex of child did not relate to any of the changes observed between 1980 and 1986 study findings.

### **Child's Age:**

Under original definitions, the overall incidence of maltreatment increased with age, and this was reflected in both abuse and neglect. Within abuse, the age-related increase in maltreatment appeared for all subcategories of abuse. Within neglect, the increase was localized to the area of educational neglect. With the revised definitions, abuse, specifically physical abuse, did positively correlate with age. Although neglect under revised definitions had no overall association with age, two of the subcategories of neglect did relate to age: educational neglect and emotional neglect. Again, children were at greater risk for these forms of maltreatment with increasing age.

Under both sets of definitions, fatal and moderate injuries showed age relationships, but of reversed patterns: fatalities were more numerous among the younger children, whereas moderate injuries were more prevalent among older age brackets. When the younger children were maltreated, however, it resulted in more serious injuries, perhaps due to their greater physical fragility in comparison to older children.

The 1980-1986 changes in the incidence of abuse and of two of its subcategories (physical and sexual) proved to have occurred disproportionately among the older age groups. Successive age groups generally showed progressively larger increases in the incidence of abuse over the 1980 levels. The fact that the relationship between maltreatment and age changed in these respects since 1980 implies that age may be more related to the recognition of physical and sexual abuse than to their actual occurrence.

### **Child's Race/Ethnicity:**

There were *no* significant relationships between the incidence of maltreatment and a child's race/ethnicity.

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\* In addition to the types of characteristics reported on here, the Congressional mandate also required that the study examine the relationship between child maltreatment and the nonpayment of child support. Because the kinds of agency respondents recruited in the NIS design generally had no information on this point, a separate study component was designed and implemented to address this question. That study, together with its findings, is the subject of a separate report (Report on Nonpayment of Child Support and Child Maltreatment).



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**Family Income:**

Low income was a significant risk factor for child maltreatment under the both sets of definitions. Children from families whose 1986 income was less than \$15,000 experienced substantially more maltreatment in all categories compared to those from families earning \$15,000 or more. There were also more frequent injury/impairments at every level among the lower income children.

**Family Size:**

Although family size made no difference for the incidence of maltreatment under the original definitions, it did affect estimates under the revised definitions. Children in families with four or more children showed higher rates of maltreatment on a variety of measures, especially in the areas of physical abuse and physical neglect. They were also more likely to be regarded as endangered--a fact which was thought to possibly be the basis for all the other differences they exhibited. That is, greater rates of perceived endangerment for children in the larger families probably resulted in generally higher rates of countable cases for these children, overall.

**County Metropolitan Status (Metrostatus):**

The metrostatus of the county had no reliable impact on the incidence of maltreatment according to any measure of type or severity. County metrostatus was related to the size of the 1980-1986 increases in incidence, but there was some question about the reliability of this finding.

**Recognition and reporting patterns--****Recognition:**

- Noninvestigatory agencies (which included schools, hospitals, social services, and mental health) recognized more than two times the number of children countable under original definitions recognized by investigatory agencies (probation/courts, police/sheriff, and public health).
- Among investigatory agencies, police/sheriff's departments recognized the greatest number of children countable by original definitions (an estimated 96,700 nationwide); probation/courts and public health departments did not differ in their recognition of maltreated children.
- Among noninvestigatory agencies, the ordering of the different types of agencies according to the numbers of children (countable by original definitions) they recognized was: schools > social services = hospitals > daycare centers = mental health agencies.
- The different agency categories showed the same relative patterns of recognition for cases defined by revised definitions as they had when cases were defined by the original standards.

#### **Reporting:**

- Of the cases countable under original study definitions, only 40%, or 6.5 children per 1,000, were known to CPS through official screened-in reports. Of the cases countable under revised definitions, 46%, had been reported to CPS and screened-in by that agency.
- Among all cases which involved maltreatment countable by original standards, the proportion that was known to CPS showed no statistically reliable changes since 1980.
- Of all the cases countable under original definitions which had been recognized by agencies of the types included in the study, only 31% had been reported to and accepted by CPS; this was not significantly different from the 21% that had been known to CPS in the 1980 study. The comparable figure for cases countable under revised definitions was 33%.
- About 44% of the cases countable under original definitions which investigatory agencies recognized were among official, screened-in CPS reports, whereas this statistic was estimated to be only 28% for the noninvestigatory agencies. For revised definitional standards, the corresponding estimates were 49% and 28%, respectively.

#### **Screened-in CPS Reports--**

- The number of children reported to CPS increased nearly 57% since 1980. In 1986, CPS received reports concerning nearly one and two-thirds million children.
- 25% of all the cases in screened-in CPS reports were countable under original study definitions; about 44% of the children reported to and screened-in CPS were countable under revised study definitions.
- A significantly greater proportion of cases reported to (and screened-in by) CPS were countable in 1986 than had been countable in 1980 (i.e., 25% vs. 19%), indicating that cases are now selected into CPS by more stringent criteria.
- In 1986, CPS either considered indicated or officially substantiated about 53% of the cases for which it received and investigated reports. This reflected a significant increase from the 43% of screened-in cases which had been substantiated/indicated in 1980.
- An estimated 39% of all cases substantiated or indicated by CPS were countable under the original study definitions; an estimated 73% of all cases substantiated or indicated by CPS were countable by revised study standards, reflecting the impact of the definition rule that considered all officially substantiated cases as automatically meeting the revised harm requirement.

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- The proportion of unfounded CPS cases which were countable under the original study definitions increased slightly but significantly since 1980, raising some concern about an increasing tendency to exclude cases which in the past would have received intervention and services.

Implications of the study. The following implications of these findings were identified:

- The increase in countable cases since 1980 probably reflected an increase in the likelihood that professionals will recognize maltreatment rather than an increase in the actual occurrence of maltreatment (i.e., in incidence per se). Potential reporters have become better attuned to the cues of maltreatment--particularly to cues concerning physical and sexual abuse, to cases involving moderate injuries, and especially for the older children. (There is also some suggestion that recognition gains in rural areas may have lagged behind those in the more metropolitan locations).
- Although there has been an increase in the likelihood that abused and neglected children will be recognized, these children are not reliably more likely to appear among the screened-in reports to CPS. This may be the fault of those who recognize maltreatment not submitting reports to CPS, or it may be due to CPS screening out cases. These alternative explanations have different policy implications:
  - If potential reporters are not reporting, it means that it has not been enough to merely increase their recognition of maltreated children. Reporting behaviors themselves must be addressed--as by conveying the beneficial results of CPS involvement.
  - If due to CPS screening out reported cases, it means that CPS resources provide insufficient support for the current high rate of recognition of maltreatment, which may jeopardize the gains in recognition that have been made thus far.
- The fact that a significantly greater proportion of reported children are now officially substantiated/indicated implies that there is now greater selectivity of cases into CPS, which is most likely due to the use of more stringent screening standards.
- The finding that a significantly greater proportion of the set of unfounded CPS cases were cases which were countable by the study's original standards indicates that some of the children who would, in the past, have had their cases substantiated/indicated (and possibly received services as a result) are now excluded as unfounded.